

Adoption-related feelings, loss, and curiosity about origins in adopted adolescents

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Abstract

Adoption involves strong emotions. From the adoptee's point of view, adoption means not only the gain of a new family but also inevitable losses. This study aims at analyzing adoption-related feelings, which include the feelings of loss and the ensuing curiosity about the birth family and pre-adoption life. A total of 81 adopted adolescents, aged 12–22, adopted at 4 years of age, on average, participated in this study. The data were collected using the Questionnaire of Adoption-related Feelings and the Adopted Adolescents Interview, which allowed for the identification of the experiences, feelings, and attitudes of the adopted adolescents regarding their story before and after adoption, and their feelings towards their birth family. The results showed that most participants did not identify adoption-related losses. Nevertheless, they acknowledged the existence of some aspects of their adoption story that made them feel sad and angry and could identify several difficulties associated with their adoptive status. Participants showed low levels of curiosity even if they were mostly curious about the reasons why they had been placed up for adoption. The adoptees' feelings when thinking about their birth parents, the curiosity regarding their past, and their adoption-related losses predicted their feelings related to the adoption experience. Several implications for the psychological practice with adopted adolescents will be presented.

Keywords

Adoption, adolescence, adoption-related losses, curiosity

According to the last Portuguese national statistics (National Institute of Social Security, 2018), 7553 children were in out-of-home care, that is, one out of 250 Portuguese youngsters under 19. Most of these children were referred by the welfare system for parental neglect, maltreatment, and/or abuse within their birth families. In 2017, 255 children were placed for adoption (<4% of over-all children in care) and were almost all domestic and same-race adoptions. The national pre-order adoption disruption rate is 5.8% (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2018). Furthermore, all adoptions

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in Portugal are confidential and post-adoption contacts with birth families are just being put into practice.

Adoption allows children, who could not grow up with their birth families, to experience a caring family environment, create emotional bonds, and fulfill their developmental needs. Thus, in addition to being a child protection measure, adoption is also a successful intervention for children who have suffered early adversity (Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006), allowing physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive recovery (Juffer et al., 2011). However, adoption also means the loss of the birth family, genealogical connection, significant previous caregivers, and a loss of status (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Understanding that adoption means both gains and losses is crucial for the adoptees' identity formation (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011), and coping emotionally with these two opposing features of adoption can sometimes be a difficult task for adoptees. Ambivalent feelings may arise when trying to make sense of the adoption experience (Brodzinsky, 1990; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Reinoso, Juffer, & Tieman, 2013; Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012), with positive feelings often related to the gains promoted by adoption (e.g. a caring and loving family who can suffice their needs, a better life or future), and negative feelings related to loss. These negative feelings may include sadness, anxiety, rejection, anger, or the unfulfilled wish to have been born in the adoptive family (Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Juffer & Tieman, 2009).

Although this process of balancing the positive and negative poles of adoption is universal to all adoptees (Brodzinsky, 1990; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002), the way adoptees ultimately feel about their story and adoption experience is deeply connected to the meaning they attribute to those experiences (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). However, the process of building a coherent biographic narrative can be challenging for adoptees, since they must face discontinuities in their family story and information gaps of their pre-adoption life, as well as cope with feelings of being different (Grotevant, 1997).

Factors influencing the experience of loss in adoption

Even if research focusing on loss is still scarce, it has been suggested that the way parenting is defined (Leon, 2002) and the importance society attributes to blood ties and genetics may increase this feeling of loss. Adopted and birth children are viewed differently, and the way adoption is experienced can depend on the concept of familyhood (Singer & Krebs, 2005). According to Miall (1987), kinship is often presented as a precondition for taking care of a child. This reinforces the stigma on adoptees, since they were not taken care of by their birth families (March, 1995; Wegar, 2000). These socially dominant beliefs about adoption shape the way adoptive families are perceived and how adults and non-adopted children interact with adopted children in different life contexts. Since adoptees can be denied access to their birth heritage, sometimes, adopted adolescents seek their birth families in order to neutralize the above-mentioned stigma and get some answers on their background roots (Wegar, 2000).

Therefore, the experience of loss can vary depending on the adoptee's particular life context, the meanings attributed to his or her losses, his or her adoption and previous life, as well as his or her cognitive and developmental stage (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). Also, research suggests that adoptees feel that their losses are not acknowledged by others as they end up growing in a family context (Powell & Afifi, 2005), which can be described as a feeling of ambiguous loss. Since in the adoption context the loss is "unclear, remains unverified and does not have an official verification" (Boss, 2016, pp. 270–271), it is devalued, and adoptees are often "left on their own to cope with lingering grief that is often unfairly diagnosed as a personal or family pathology" (Boss, 2016, p. 271). Likewise, Powell and Afifi (2005) found that most adoptees who experienced significant

levels of loss also showed relationship and trust problems. The majority of the participants had never spoken to anyone about their feelings of loss or negative feelings related to their previous story, mainly for fear of rejection by the adoptive family and fear of disrupting the family dynamics. Therefore, the experience of loss can be determined by the way children manage their negative feelings about their life story as a whole. This stresses the importance that communication about adoption can have in the adoptive family context (Nilsson et al., 2011; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Smith and Brodzinsky (1994, 2002) reported children who rarely experienced feelings of loss regarding their birth family, but also identified children who experienced constant and very intense negative feelings related to their adoption, previous story, and birth family.

The circumstances of adoption and the reasons that led the child to adoption are also likely to have implications on the experience of loss. Late adopted children retain memories of their birth family, and these memories can increase the experience of loss. In fact, these children often had no other experience of family life other than what they had endured with their birth family, and adoption implied the breakdown of a relationship that could eventually have been emotionally significant (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Hodges, Steele, Hillman, Henderson, & Kaniuk, 2003). Furthermore, the child's awareness about adoption depends on his or her cognitive developmental stage, and an association seems to exist between development and the experience of loss (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Display of feelings of loss inherent to adoption

The feelings of loss are often displayed by negative feelings about oneself, adoption and pre-adoption story, and by the adoptee's curiosity regarding his/her birth family and pre-adoption life (Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002). Curiosity plays an important role in the lives of adoptees since they had a specific life experience: being born in a family and growing up in another. Wrobel and Dillon (2009) found that the main curiosity of 153 American adolescent adoptees was related to the reason why they were given up for adoption and showed that age at adoption defined the contents of curiosity. Jones and Hackett (2007) also pointed out that early childhood memories later shaped the content of the questions and curiosity in adolescence. In relation to the intensity of curiosity, Wrobel and Dillon (2009) found that most participants reported some curiosity regarding their birth parents. Although some studies (e.g. Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000) present support that female adolescents show more curiosity regarding their adoption story and their past, other studies (e.g. Wrobel and Dillon, 2009; Wrobel, Grotevant, Samek, & Von Korff, 2013) did not find any differences in the intensity of curiosity according to the gender of the participants.

The development of the understanding about adoption and the experience of loss

Roughly between the age of 6–12, children acquire skills, particularly in terms of logical reasoning, social cognition, and self-reflection about themselves as adopted individuals, that will change their conceptions about adoption and family (Brodzinsky, 1987, 1990, 1993; Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, & Merkler, 1987; Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002). With an increased understanding of topics related to the family, such as reproduction and birth, curiosity begins to emerge about their origins that can lead to feelings of loss regarding their birth families. However, in this developmental stage, children tend not to experience the loss of their birth parents as a traumatic experience (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002).

The ability to understand and take the others' perspective, as well as empathize towards other people and situations also increases in school-aged children (Brodzinsky, 2011). Children start thinking about the dilemma faced by their birth parents when they made the decision to give up on their children, considering other options that parents could have pondered (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). Consequently, these children begin to wonder about the problems of their birth family and the implications of their adoption to their birth parents (Newman, Roberts, & Syre, 1993). Questions such as, "Do my birth parents think of me? Are they sorry?" are common and can lead to feelings of sadness and anxiety (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Therefore, with the development of logical thinking, children become aware that adoption does not only mean gaining a family, but also losing another one. Brodzinsky, (1987, 1990, 1993; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994) states that this awareness can arouse feelings of ambivalence regarding adoption and adjustment problems. In fact, the literature (Askeland et al., 2017; Bimmel, Juffer, Van, IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003; Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman, & Merkler, 1987; Dickson, Heffron, & Parker, 1990; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Kotsopoulos et al., 1988) has evidenced the existence of adjustment problems in populations of adoptees.

With the beginning of adolescence and the development of formal abstract thought, the ability to understand the true meaning and implications of adoption deepens. At this stage, adolescents start understanding that adoption is associated with a legal permanence (Brodzinsky et al., 1984), in some cases reducing the anxiety that the fear of being returned entails.

The identity construction task has specific features in adolescence and the adoptive identity extends to the birth family. Thus, the development of an adoptive identity may include plans of searching for origins. In many cases, adolescents seek information about their birth family to find the missing pieces and to better understand themselves and link the past, present, and future.

The ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others also increases during adolescence. Consequently, at this stage, adolescents start to show more realistic views and empathic respect for their birth parents and their living conditions (Brodzinsky, 2011). Adopted adolescents begin to understand adoption from a social point of view, with positive and negative implications. They recognize adoption as a social measure to improve the lives of many children, allowing them to experience a family relationship, but also realizing that adoption is socially the second (or third) alternative to parenting (Fisher, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Juffer, 2006; Wegar, 2000). This awareness leads them to question their value in the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2011). Thus, contextual factors, such as (a) the amount of information provided about adoption and previous story, (b) the family openness to the adoption topic, and (c) the circumstances of adoption and the reasons they were given up for adoption (Powell & Afifi, 2005) but also factors, such as cognitive development, temperament, and relationships previous to adoption (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998), seem to have implications on how loss is experienced.

This study

Despite the consensus that loss is transversal to all adoptees and the acknowledgment of the relationship between the feelings of loss and the adoptees' psychological well-being, research focusing on this subject is scarce and mostly outdated. In addition, most studies use samples of adopted children rather than adolescents (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). Furthermore, there are few studies approaching both curiosity and feelings of loss. Therefore, it is important to characterize how domestically adopted adolescents experience loss, trying to understand how they assess their adoption experience and deal with their negative feelings, in order to design interventions and establish policies that meet their real needs. In this context, this study aims to characterize adoptees' feelings regarding their adoptive status, the feelings of loss inherent to adoption (feelings

about themselves and birth parents) and their curiosity about adoption, ultimately aiming to understand the relationships between these variables.

This study intends to contribute to the multidimensional and developmental model developed by Brodzinsky, (1990, 1993), based on the stress and coping model of Lazarus and collaborators (Lazarus, Delongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985) to explain the psychological adjustment of the adoptee. According to this model, the adjustment of the adoptee is mediated by cognitive evaluation processes and a set of cognitive and behavioural efforts. The cognitive assessment is based on how the adoptee interprets the meaning of being adopted and assesses the options available to cope with the conflicts, demands, and challenges of the adoptive status. In this study, the focus will be on the cognitive assessment that the adoptee makes of all his/her adoptive experience, regarding the feelings of loss that it entails.

Method

Participants

A total of 81 adopted adolescents, 43 boys (53.1%) and 38 girls (46.9%), aged 12–22 ($M = 15.12$, $SD = 2.39$) participated in this study. These adolescents were adopted from care, on average, at 4.34 years old ($SD = 3.44$, $Min = 0.10$, $Max = 17.00$), and the adoption time varied between 2 and 21.5 years ($M = 10.77$, $SD = 3.80$). All participants were adopted through same-race adoption. In all, 25 of the adopted adolescents had never lived with their birth families, 30 had been victims of neglect, 11 had been abandoned, 11 had been abused, and 4 had no knowledge about their past experiences.

Measures

The feelings related to the adoption experience were assessed using the Questionnaire on Adoption-Related Feelings (QAF, Barroso, Barbosa-Ducharne, & Coelho, 2018). The QAF is a self-report questionnaire, composed of 10 items (e.g. When others talk about their background and about their family story, I feel bad for not knowing mine; I am angry because my questions about my birth family cannot all be answered at this time), which were assessed on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1—completely disagree to 6—totally agree. Higher scores represent a stronger intensity of negative feelings related to the adoptive status. The reliability Cronbach's α for QAF was .93.

Adoption-related losses were assessed by the Adopted Adolescents Interview (AAI, Ferreira, Barroso, & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2013; adapted from Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project, 1996–2000). This interview allowed to explore the experiences, feelings, and attitudes of the adolescent adoptees regarding their story before and after adoption. It is semi-structured and includes open-ended questions, dichotomous answers, and Likert-type scales.

This study only considered some of the questions. The open-ended questions were as follows:

1. "How do you feel talking about your past?"
2. "What did you lose with adoption?"
3. "What related to your previous life and adoption story makes you feel sad?"
4. "What related to your pre-adoption life makes you feel angry?"
5. "In relation to your previous life and adoption story, what were the three most difficult aspects?"
6. "In relation to your adoption story, what was the worst thing that happened to you?"
7. "Currently, is there something related to your adoption story that worries you?"

Nine AAI items, which were answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale, (from 1—nothing alike to 4—very alike) also focused on adoption-related losses. These items were as follows:

1. I feel very sad because I was placed up for adoption;
2. I feel different from other adolescents because I was adopted;
3. I feel sad when I think about my birth parents;
4. I am teased because I am an adoptee;
5. Having been removed from my birth parents makes me feel sad;
6. Being adopted is not as good as being born in the adoptive family;
7. I can't feel happy without knowing my birth parents;
8. I am treated differently by people who know I am adopted;
9. I'm not as good as other adolescents who live with their birth parents.

An exploratory factorial analysis through principal component analysis was conducted with these nine items regarding adoption-related losses. The value of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test was 0.902. From this analysis, a factor emerged (eigenvalue > 1), explaining 54.80% of variance. The internal consistency was evaluated through Cronbach's α , obtaining an $\alpha = .91$. Consequently, a composite variable of the loss inherent the adoption status, called "adoption related losses", was created through the mean scores of the items that compose it. Higher scores refer to stronger feelings of loss.

Three additional AAI questions were also considered in relation to the frequency (on a 4-point Likert-type scale) with which adolescents experience feelings such as anger, sadness, and confusion when they think about their birth mother and father, as well as themselves as adoptees. Higher scores correspond to more frequent negative feelings.

Finally, in relation to the adoptees' curiosity about their previous life story, the following AAI open-ended questions were considered: (1) "If you could ask your birth parents 3 questions, what would they be?" and (2) "What more would you like to know about your birth parents, your birth family and your past?." An additional AAI question, asked on a 4-point Likert-type scale, was about the intensity of the curiosity regarding the past/life before adoption.

Procedure

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Porto and the National Board of Data Protection (3226/2013). The National Agency for Adoption cooperated in the recruitment of the participants who met the sample selection criteria—being an adolescent adoptee, adopted for more than a year. All data were collected by trained psychologists and considering the emotional implications of the issues approached during the interview, the research team supplied free psychological follow-up to all participants who requested it. This support was given following the data collection. Furthermore, at the end of the each session of data collection, specific activities were proposed to each participant to relieve accumulated stress and/or stronger emotions.

At the time of the sampling selection, in the geographical area of the study (a district in the North of Portugal), there were 410 adoptive families fulfilling the selection criteria. Out of these 410 families, 120 were randomly contacted. These were distributed evenly in three different groups according to the age at adoption (0–2; 3–5; 6 or older). From these 120, only 81 accepted to participate in the study. The study was carried out with a sample of 81 adoptees, which is a frequent number in adoption studies requiring face-to-face interviews. All participants signed a consent form in which their participation was confirmed as being voluntary.

The normality of the distribution of all the variables was explored and the requisites for parametric procedures were analyzed. Whenever needed, nonparametric procedures were applied and when the results of nonparametric tests matched the results of parametric ones, the latter were reported (Fife-Schaw, 2006). Finally, assumptions such as linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of error distribution, multicollinearity, and independence of errors (Durbin-Watson, with values between 1.67 and 2.24) in the multiple regression were assured.

Results

Feelings related to the adoption experience and adoption-related losses

Table 1 shows the descriptive measures of the study's variables. The distribution of the variable "feelings related to the adoption experience" showed that adolescents experience negative feelings related to their adoptive status on an almost average intensity ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.56$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 6$).

The distribution of the variable "adoption related losses" showed that adolescents do experience average levels of adoption related losses ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 0.77$, $Min = 1$, $Max = 4$). A significant weak negative correlation was found between adoption-related losses and the age of the participants ($r = -.25$, $p < .05$). Only 31 adolescents (39.2%) identified losses related to their adoptive status. However, 48 participants (60.8%) reported that there was something related to their adoption story that made them feel sad, namely: (a) the rejection by the birth family ($n = 24$) (e.g. *I feel very sad when I think why my mother left me, abandoned me and did not want to know me, to live knowing this, is very sad*), (b) the loss of significant persons ($n = 10$) (e.g. *To know that I ran away from all the foster families I was placed in, I lost people who were important to me*), (c) the lack of pre-adoption memories ($n = 6$) (e.g. *I do not remember anything. The whole mystery makes me curious, but mostly very sad, but I can't admit it to anyone*), (c) being adopted ($n = 6$) (e.g. *Actually it's really been adopted . . . being adopted means that something very bad happened and I will remember and suffer with it forever*), and (d) difficulties in identifying with the adoptive family ($n = 2$) (e.g. *It was bad enough what happened to me before adoption and then I still had a family like that . . . So many families and I got this one that is nothing like me*). Similarly, 47 participants (59.5%) admitted feeling angry/upset about something related to their adoption story, such as (a) the rejection by birth family ($n = 27$) (e.g. *I get very angry if I think about why my mother left me and didn't care about me . . . It's what annoys me the most in life.*), (b) the loss of significant persons ($n = 9$), (e.g. *Having been separated from my siblings...*), (c) the characteristics of their birth parents ($n = 6$) (e.g. *What makes me really angry is that my birth parents are irresponsible, characterless and not careful and didn't think before they had a child*), (d) the stigma associated with the adoptive status ($n = 3$) (e.g. *That's when the . . . I mean, I say things, and people don't even pity me . . . They also make fun of it!*), and (e) the lack of pre-adoption memories ($n = 2$) (e.g. *Not having memories of when I was little . . . Whenever other people talk about it and tell stories I can't talk. It's bad!*).

Participants were asked to mention up to three difficulties which were associated with their adoptive status. In all, 30 adolescents failed to identify any difficulty, 29 participants acknowledged one difficulty, 16 participants referred two, and only 6 adolescents reported three difficulties associated with their adoptive status. The loss of significant persons is the difficulty which is more often stated ($n = 18$) (e.g. *Undoubtedly having to abandon the foster family*), followed by the rejection by the birth family ($n = 13$) (e.g. *Being abandoned, being rejected and living with that information*), having been adopted ($n = 10$) (e.g. *It was kind of hard coming here . . . being adopted . . . and getting used to . . .*), the lack of pre-adoption memories ($n = 6$) (e.g. *Not having my memories about what happened, always being dependent on what and when others want to tell*), and dealing with

Table 1. Descriptive measures and intercorrelations between the feelings related to the adoption experience, the expressions of loss inherent to adoption, and socio-demographic and pre-adoption life variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Feelings related to the adoption experience	1													
2. Adoption-related losses	.61***	1												
3. Number of difficulties	.22	.010	1											
4. Frequency of adoptees' negative feelings towards birth parents	.28*	.23	.15	1										
5. Frequency of adoptees' negative feelings when thinking about themselves as an adopted individual	.46***	.56***	.25*	.21	1									
6. Satisfaction with the adoptive family	-.23*	-.28*	-.37**	-.16	-.39**	1								
7. Parents' promotion of children's integration	-.27*	-.42***	-.35**	.02	-.40***	.45***	1							
8. Number of questions adoptees would ask their birth parents	.28*	.18	.20	-.18	.18	-.03	-.10	1						
9. Intensity of curiosity	.32**	.33**	.17	.02	.14	-.12	-.16	.52***	1					
10. Age	-.24*	-.25*	.18	-.12	-.29*	.02	.01	-.06	-.10	1				
11. Time spent with the birth family (months)	-.01	.05	.05	.21	-.06	-.12	.13	-.27*	.10	.04	1			
12. Time spent in out-of-home care (months)	-.06	-.20	.10	.11	-.09	-.16	-.03	.04	.06	.02	.19	1		
13. Age at adoption	-.10	-.12	.02	.13	-.11	-.16	.08	-.25*	.01	.20	.72***	.61***	1	
14. Time of adoption	-.06	-.05	.10	-.19	-.09	.17	-.08	.18	-.07	.45**	-.62***	-.54***	-.78***	1
M (SD)	2.80 (1.56)	2.20 (0.77)	0.96 (0.91)	2.70 (0.53)	1.78 (0.59)	4.79 (0.57)	3.70 (0.62)	1.63 (1.13)	2.81 (1.46)	15.12 (2.39)	17.63 (22.83)	32.45 (30.06)	4.34 (3.44)	10.77 (3.80)
Range	1.00–6.00	1.00–4.00	0.00–3.00	1.54–4.00	1.00–3.67	2.00–5.00	1.00–4.00	0.00–4.00	1.00–5.00	12.00–22.00	0.00–96.00	0.00–190.00	0.10–17.00	2.00–21.50

The figures in bold are the significant correlations.

**p* < .05.

***p* < .01.

****p* < .001.

the adoption stigma ($n = 4$) (e.g. *With this adoption thing, people are always labeling everything . . . I feel a lot of grudges against these things and sometimes I become very upset and hurt that I don't get to be the person I really am*).

Adolescents who reported that there was something related to adoption that made them feel sad also reported more difficulties associated with their adoptive status ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 0.88$) than adolescents who did not do so ($M = 0.55$, $DP = .81$), $t_{(77)} = -3.46$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.80$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = $[-1.07, -.289]$. The same applied to adolescents who reported feeling angry/upset about something related to adoption ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 0.88$) when compared to those who did not feel angry/upset ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.87$) and had listed fewer difficulties associated with their adoptive status, $t_{(77)} = -2.83$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.64$, 95% CI = $[-0.97, -.17]$.

A little more than half of the participants (55.7%) were able to identify the worst thing that had happened to them as a result of adoption. A total of 16 participants reported the fact that they did not know or did not understand the reasons for rejection or abandonment by the birth family (e.g. *I never felt angry but there is always sadness . . . In fact, there's always a little bit of outrage and the worst is knowing that a parent doesn't care about us. It's always hard . . . why didn't they keep me?*); 15 the loss of significant persons (e.g. *Leaving my friends*), 9 having been adopted (e.g. *It was knowing that I was going to be adopted and then coming here from nowhere*); and 5, birth family characteristics (e.g. *It was knowing what my parents were basically . . . If they did what they did, they are clueless people, the worst there is*).

Concerning the frequency of negative feelings when thinking about their birth mother, the average score was 2.71 ($SD = 0.56$). A similar figure was found for the frequency of negative feelings when thinking about their birth father ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.57$). There was a significant strong positive correlation between the frequency of negative feelings when thinking about the birth mother and the birth father ($r = .75$, $p < .001$). Thus, these two variables were computed into one variable called the frequency of negative feelings when thinking about birth parents, in which a mean score of 2.70 ($SD = 0.53$) was obtained. The mean score of frequency of adoptees' negative feelings when thinking about themselves as adopted individuals was 1.78 ($SD = 0.59$).

Most adolescent adoptees (67.1%) stated that currently they do not have any concerns about their adoption story. However, 17 adolescents said they would like to know how their birth parents were faring (if they were alive and about their health) (e.g. *I'm worried . . . if something may have happened to them or that they fight together; that make my father and mother more aggressive, or if they have died*), 6 participants were afraid of being removed from their adoptive families (e.g. *I only worry if I ever find out that this family is not mine forever and that I have to leave*), and 3 expressed fear of their birth family finding them (e.g. *Regarding my birth parents, I'm concerned that they will come after me and find my family and I*). Furthermore, participants were very satisfied with their adoptive families ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.50$, $\text{Min} = 2$, $\text{Max} = 5$) and thought that their adoptive parents made their family integration very easy ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.62$, $\text{Min} = 1$, $\text{Max} = 4$).

Only 20 adolescents did not show any curiosity regarding their birth family, because they had no interest in the matter ($n = 17$) (e.g. *These are my parents . . . I'm not curious to know who my father or my mother was or anything about them, because this topic ceased to interest me when I was adopted*) and already knew everything about their story ($n = 3$) (e.g. *Because I know what I wanted to and I'm fine right now and . . . there is no sense in asking about things that have already happened and . . . do not have the least interest sincerely. If I had any questions, I'd ask them now, but I don't have any*). However, when asked whether adoptees had any questions they wanted to ask their birth parents, only 17 adolescents said they would not ask any questions. Out of the remaining, 20 said they would ask one question, 22 would ask 2 questions, 21 would ask 3, and one

would ask 4 questions. On average, the participants would ask their birth parents 1.63 ($SD = 1.13$) questions.

Regarding the content of adoptees' curiosity, the reasons why birth parents gave them up for adoption ($n = 56$) (e.g. *Why did they abandon me? Why didn't they want to stay with me?*) are the main issues pointed out by the adolescents, followed by curiosity regarding their birth parents ($n = 34$) (e.g. *What they called themselves, where they lived . . .*), the past ($n = 23$) (e.g. *Why did we have a miserable life?*), birth siblings ($n = 19$) (e.g. *Do I have brothers? Where are they? What happened to them?*), other elements of their birth family ($n = 3$) (e.g. *Do I have a lot of family? Can I meet them? Why did they not want to know about me and abandon me too?*), and their foster families ($n = 2$) (e.g. *How are they? Why didn't they call me or visit me?*). In relation to the curiosity about their birth parents, it should be noted that adoptees would like to know: who they are ($n = 5$) (e.g. *Who are they? I'd like to meet them*), how/where they are ($n = 6$) (e.g. *Do they live near me? Where are they from? Are they alive?*), their occupation ($n = 3$) (e.g. *Are they still doing nothing at home or did they get a job? What do they do now?*) and their personality/behaviour ($n = 20$) (e.g. *Why was she arrested? Why was she so irresponsible?*).

The intensity of curiosity was assessed on a 4-point Likert-type scale, and an average of 2.81 ($SD = 1.46$) was found. There were no significant differences regarding the intensity of curiosity, according to the age of the adolescents, adoption time, or the age at adoption.

Adoptees who were worried about some aspect related to adoption reported higher curiosity ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.44$) than participants who were not ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.41$), $t_{(76)} = -2.36$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.57$, 95% CI = $[-1.50, -.13]$. Similarly, participants who were concerned about some aspect related to adoption showed more difficulties associated with their adoptive status ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.85$) when compared with those who were not ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 0.89$), $t_{(77)} = -2.73$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.67$, 95% CI = $[-0.99, -0.16]$.

Relationship between feelings related to the adoption experience and adoption-related losses

Table 1 presents the overall correlations matrix. All displays or expressions of loss inherent to the adoptive status (adoption-related losses, frequency of adoptees' negative feelings towards birth parents, frequency of adoptees' negative feelings when thinking about themselves, number of questions adoptees would like to ask and intensity of curiosity) correlate with the feelings related to the adoption experience.

Predictors of feelings related to the adoption experience

Based on the above intercorrelations, to identify the predictors of the feelings related to the adoption experience, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted, considering as independent variables all the variables related to the displays or expressions of loss inherent to the adoptive status. The assumptions of the model were analyzed, specifically the normal distribution, homogeneity, and independence of errors. The first two assumptions were validated graphically and the independence assumption was validated with the Durbin–Watson statistic ($d = 1.62$). The variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to diagnose multicollinearity, and there were no collinear variables in both the models. The final multiple linear regression model allowed for the identification of the following predictors: adoptees' feelings when thinking about their birth parents ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$), intensity of curiosity about the past ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$), and adoption-related losses ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$), which all together explained 50% of the variance of the feelings related to the adoption experience, $F_{(3,62)} = 22.53$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to characterize adoptees' feelings regarding their adoption experience, the feelings of loss inherent and their curiosity about adoption, and understand the relationships between these variables. It should be noted that all the results presented concern the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of a specific period of life of the participants of this study. Since this is not a longitudinal study, the conceptions presented are specific to a given developmental period, which varies from participant to participant and can undergo alterations during the life cycle.

The first set of findings revealed that adolescents experience average levels of adoption-related losses and low negative feelings related to their adoption experience. Smith and Brodzinsky (1994, 2002) found similar results with some participants showing close to no feelings of loss. However, it cannot be ruled out, since these results on low levels of loss inherent to adoption can also be due to the difficulty of adoptees in expressing these feelings to others (Powell & Afifi, 2005). The difficulty of the participants in expressing their feelings, thoughts, and negative experiences related to their adoptive status can rely on the measures used, namely with the questionnaires. The measures used focus mainly on negative issues related to the experience of adoption, which may have conditioned the answers. However, participants were not induced to assume negative feelings and experiences, since they could completely disagree with the statements given, and had the opportunity to express their own feelings, whether negative or not. A relationship between the adoptees' age and adoption-related losses was found showing that the older the adolescents are the less they express loss. Previous research suggests otherwise, showing that as children age and their cognitive development progresses, they can face additional challenges when processing their feelings regarding adoption and pre-adoption story, becoming more aware of the complexities of the process (Brodzinsky, 1987, 1990, 1993, 2011; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Newman et al., 1993; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). This study's findings can be understood by considering the specific age range of the participants, since adoptees in the sample were aged 12–22, with an average age of 15.12. It is possible that older adolescents have already gone through the most challenging phases of development and are now at a more resourceful stage that allows them to adequately integrate their adoption and pre-adoption story.

Most participants were not able to identify any losses associated with their adoption experience. However, 60.8% of the adoptees in the sample mentioned the existence of some aspect about their adoption story that made them feel sad. The rejection by their birth family was stated more often. Similarly, most participants identified feelings of anger related to their adoption story, and the rejection by their birth family was also the most often cited reason for anger. Most participants reported difficulties related to their adoptive status. The most listed were the loss of significant persons and the rejection by birth family. Finally, half of the participants identified the worst aspect related to their adoption story, and the loss of significant persons was mentioned with greater frequency.

The overall results are consistent with those described in the literature by Brodzinsky (1987, 1990, 1993; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002), since participants were able to identify different issues related to their adoption and pre-adoption story that influence their present life and feelings. Thus, it seems these adolescents have acquired the ability to fully understand the meaning of adoption as well as its implications, realizing that adoption does not only mean gaining a family, but also losing one.

Although most participants referred not holding any concerns about their adoption story, 17 wanted to ask their birth parents how they were doing. These data showed that the birth family remained present for adoptees, even after adoption. In fact, adoptees often question themselves about whether the birth parents still have problems and what were for them the implications of their adoption (Newman et al., 1993). These questions can raise feelings of sadness, anxiety (Brodzinsky, 2011), or worry as found in this study.

The adolescent's feelings when thinking about themselves as adoptees and their feelings when thinking about their birth parents were also assessed. The results showed that adolescents who nurtured more negative feelings when thinking about themselves and their birth parents showed more negative feelings related to the adoption experience. Moreover, adoptees who had more negative feelings when thinking about themselves also reported more difficulties associated with their adoptive status. These results are noteworthy, since they show that to make the adoption experience more positive for adopted adolescents, practitioners should help adoptees to better deal with the feelings they nurture for the birth family and for themselves as adopted individuals.

The adolescent adoptees in this sample showed great satisfaction with their adoptive families and thought their adoptive parents promoted their integration. The results showed that the more satisfaction adoptees reported and the more they considered that their parents made their family integration easy, the less difficulties associated with their adoption experience were reported. These results highlight the important role that the adoptive family can have in mitigating the difficulties their adoptive children may face in adolescence, as previously shown by other authors (Juffer et al., 2011; Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006).

A second set of results is related to the curiosity about the birth family. Curiosity is the gap between the known and the unknown (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) and a process which is uniquely experienced by each adoptee. Despite curiosity about origins being normative, in this study participants showed low levels of curiosity. Different results are reported by other researchers (e.g. Wrobel et al., 2013), where levels of intermediate curiosity were found. Jones and Hackett (2007) emphasize the importance of the age at adoption in the absence of curiosity, but in this study no relationship was found between the intensity of curiosity and the age at adoption. Also, in contrast to other studies (Irhammar & Cederblad, 2000; Wrobel et al., 2013), there were no statistically significant differences regarding the intensity of curiosity, according to gender.

Despite these low levels of curiosity, only 20 out of 81 adolescents reported not having any curiosity regarding their birth family, either because of the lack of interest in the subject or because they already knew everything they wanted to know. Regarding the content of curiosity of the adolescents who admitted they were curious about some aspect of their birth family, the reasons they were given up for adoption were the most listed ones. This result corroborates the findings of the study of Wrobel and Dillon (2009), in which the reasons for abandonment were also a significant topic of curiosity. Regarding the curiosity about birth parents, the aspects adolescents would most like to know were who their parents were, how and where they were, their occupation, and their personality/behaviour. As previously mentioned, these results show once again that the birth family remains present for adoptees even after adoption (Newman et al., 1993).

Adolescents who showed greater curiosity and who would ask more questions about their birth families also displayed more negative feelings related to the adoption experience and adoption-related losses. Moreover, adoptees who identified concerns about some aspect related to their adoption showed higher curiosity and more difficulties associated with their adoptive status than those who did not. These results suggest the importance of communication about the adoptee's pre-adoption life within adoptive families, as found by other authors (Nilsson et al., 2011; Powell & Afifi, 2005).

The final set of results revealed that all displays or expressions of loss inherent to the adoptive status correlate with the feelings related to the adoption experience. These correlations showed that there is a direct relationship between the feelings adoptees experience towards their adoptive status and their losses. The results are coherent with the findings reported by Smith and Brodzinsky (2002), who showed the close relationship between the way adoptees manage their feelings and the loss experiences in adoption. Moreover, the adolescents' feelings when thinking about their birth parents, the curiosity about the past, and the adoption-related losses predicted the adoptees'

feelings related to their adoption experience. These results are consistent with previous research (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002) showing that the feelings adoptees experience in adoption can vary between individuals (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002), depending on the adoptee's particular contexts, the meanings attributed to their losses, adoption and previous life, and their cognitive developmental level. The influence of negative feelings related to adoption can, however, be less impactful if adoptees can positively integrate their feelings about their past family connections, and if they can better cope with loss and the gaps of information about their life story.

In general, adoptees are portrayed in the literature as showing a greater tendency for having psychological adjustment problems (Brodzinsky et al., 1987; Dickson et al., 1990; Kotsopoulos et al., 1988). Nevertheless, meta-analysis studies (Askeland et al., 2017; Bimmel et al., 2003; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005) have reported small or very small differences between adoptees' and non-adoptees' psychological adjustment, when differences reach statistically significant levels. From this perspective, Askeland et al. (2017) found that the scale of differences between adoptees and non-adoptees is larger in clinical populations than in the general one. To understand why some adolescents present adjustment problems and others do not, it is crucial that their pre-adoption adversity experiences are taken into consideration. However, notwithstanding the relevant nature of these conditions, they do not explain why some adoptees are better adjusted than others. In addition to early adversity, other relevant factors should be considered, namely, the way each adoptee copes with the emotions and thoughts related to these early experiences within the birth family. This study's findings highlight the variety of self-reported adoption experiences.

These results are very important for practice with adoptees. Helping adolescents to develop positive feelings about themselves as adopted individuals, their birth families, and helping them to cope adaptively with the losses along the way and throughout their lives, as well as helping families in the integration process could be very important for professionals whose goals are to lessen the negative feelings felt by adoptees. This study also provides clues about the feelings experienced by adoptees that can be important when promoting a healthy psychological adjustment. Specific training of mental health professionals on adoption-related losses is highly suggested by this study. Since adoption is so specific, it is extremely important for professionals working with adoptive families to know about these dynamics and other adoption-related information. Better trained adoption practitioners will better meet the needs of the parents and children who seek their help. The training and empowerment of prospective adopters and the professional intervention with adoptive parents also seem to be relevant, since these parents can have a significant role in helping their children to cope with loss. When preparing adoptive parents for adoption, it is important to address these issues to adjust future expectations.

This study has some limitations. The first one is the participation bias, since adolescents who accepted to participate in the study are more likely to be better adjusted to their situation as adoptees. The second limitation is that it relies on adolescent adoptees' self-reported information on emotionally sensitive data and participants could have developed either a self-defensive narrative (denying losses and negative feelings) or a truly well-adjusted identity. Further research should explore this in-depth. A third limitation relates to the sample size, which is not large enough to allow for the generalization of the results. The fact that it is not a longitudinal study constitutes another limitation. It would be advisable to carry out longitudinal studies to perceive the evolution of the feelings of loss inherent to adoption, comparing these aspects in different developmental stages. Despite these limitations, this study presents some progress in adoption research and practice.

One of the advantages of the study is the analysis of feelings about the adoption experience as a whole, directly interviewing the adolescent adoptee. The opportunity of listening to the voice of the adoptee allowed for the understanding of the making of the adoption experience, the raising of

different, ambivalent, and often confusing feelings, the meanings adoptees attribute to their own adoption experience, their self-awareness as adopted individuals, which surely influence their adoptive identity. The reading of this study's findings allowed to outline professional practices and interventions based on scientific knowledge that meets the real needs of adopted adolescents. These conclusions are even more relevant when defining post-adoption service policies aimed at providing psychological help to distressed adoptees. Since the adoption experience has such specific contours, it is extremely important that professionals working with adoptees know about the dynamics and other adoption-related issues. Good post-adoption services require trained practitioners acquainted with cutting-edge research in the field.

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